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ABSTRACT

The terms "learning communities" and "communities of practice" are being used with increasing frequency to describe the phenomenon of groups (communities) of individuals learning together. Theories focusing on the social nature of cognition and meaning, as opposed to those focusing on individual learning, are stressed. In works on the social nature of learning, students and teachers are considered social and cultural actors, and the process and content of learning are considered intertwined. It has been suggested that the term "community" can mask the privileging of homogeneity because many communities are created around common interests and bonds. According to such thinking, community is a form of relationship between people. When thought of as a relationship, the interaction among community, discourse, and culture is critical to understanding community. Several ethical questions arise in learning that is situated, including the effect of many models used in workplace education and training. Such models may keep newcomers on the periphery and transmit only technical and instrumental knowledge. Inconsistencies have been noted between communities of practice in higher education and adult education that create conflicts with many assumptions underlying the field of adult education. (A 22-item annotated bibliography constitutes approximately 75% of this document.) (MN)

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TRENDS AND ISSUES ALERT NO. 26

by Susan Imel
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Learning Communities/ Communities of Practice

Learning in community can take a variety of forms. Terms used to describe the phenomenon of groups (communities)of individuals learning together include *learning communities* and *communities of practice*; these terms are appearing more frequently in the literature. It is not unusual, for example, to see references to learning communities in conjunction with online learning (e.g., Palloff and Pratt 1999; Russell and Ginsburg 1999). The work of Wenger (see Stamps 1997; Wenger 1998; Wenger and Snyder 2000a,b) has focused on communities of practice—groups that organize informally and that are "resistant to supervision and interference" (Wenger and Snyder 2000a, p. 40)—as a site of learning. This **Alert** explores some of the trends and issues associated with the concept of learning in community and lists resources for additional information.

The type of learning that occurs in community is characterized as emphasizing the social as opposed to the individual (Barab and Duffy 2000; Heaney 1995; Wenger 1998; Zukas and Malcolm 2000). Theories that focus on the social nature of cognition and meaning—as opposed to those that focus on individual learning—are stressed (Barab and Duffy 2000), and the learning is considered to be situated in the social context (Hansman 2001). The work of Lave and Wenger (1991) is the basis for much of the writing about the social nature of learning. In this type of learning, "students and teachers are considered to be social and cultural actors with identities emerging from their wider social experiences" (Zukas and Malcolm 2000, p. 6), and the process and the content of learning are intertwined (Heaney 1995; Senge 1997; Zukas and Malcolm 2000).

In the adult education literature, some issues are raised related to learning in community. St. Clair (1998) suggests that the use of the term *community* can mask the privileging of homogeneity because many communities are created around common interests and bonds. He views community as a form of relationship between people, rather than as a collection of things or people. When thought of as relationship, the interaction among community, discourse, and culture is critical to understanding community (ibid.). Heaney (1995) points out several ethical questions that arise in learning that is situated, including the effect of many models used in workplace education and training. Such models may, for example, keep newcomers on the periphery and transmit only technical and instrumental knowledge. Both Heaney (ibid.) and Zukas and Malcolm (2000) point out inconsistencies between communities of practice in higher education and adult education that create conflicts with many of the assumptions underlying the field of adult education. The culture of the university, for example, tends to emphasize the individual learner over the group and has expectations related to accountability that require grading.

Resources

Barab, S. A., and Duffy, T. M. "From Practice Fields to Communities of Practice." In ***Theoretical Foundations of Learning***, edited by D. H. Jonassen and S. M. Land. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2000.
Two views of learning—situativity and constructivism—are examined from the psychological and anthropological perspective to explore the implications of the construction of communities of practice.

Billett, S. "Ontogeny and Participation in Communities of Practice: A Socio-Cognitive View of Adult Development." ***Studies in the Education of Adults*** 30, no. 1 (April 1998): 21-34.
Explores how the transformation and development of adult knowledge are secured through participation in social practice throughout life. Among the five premises underlying that view are the influence of social practice on the construction of knowledge and the influence of different communities of practice on adult development.

Brown, J. S., and Duguid, P. "Balancing Act: How to Capture Knowledge without Killing It." ***Harvard Business Review*** 78, no. 3 (May-June 2000): 73-80.
Contrasts process with practice to describe how organizations can capture and use the knowledge produced by their members. Balancing practice and process allows new ideas that are generated through practice to be implemented.

Cox, R. M. "Web of Wisdom: A Field Study of a Virtual Learning Community." Dissertation, Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, 1999.
Reports on a field study of 12 adults engaged in a computer-mediated education program using an asynchronous online conference. Personal storytelling and virtual group discussion revealed examples of transpersonal experiences, in which the participants' sense of identity extended beyond the individual or personal to encompass wider aspects of relatedness to others, the natural world, or the cosmos.

Hansman, C. A. "Context-Based Adult Learning." In ***The New Update on Adult Learning Theory. New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*** no. 89, edited by S. B. Merriam, pp. 43-51. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001.
Describes communities of practice as a site of situated learning and suggests that adult educators can create opportunities for such communities to form as a way of fostering learning.

Heaney, T. "Learning to Control Democratically: Ethical Questions in Situated Adult Education." Unpublished paper, June 1995. (ED 397 238)
Describes how the theoretical framework of situated learning developed by Lave and Wenger rejects individualistic and psychological theories of learning and instead fosters the development of learning that is characterized as participation in a community of practice. The following issues are discussed in the context of this framework: the disempowering consequences of many training models, the anomalies of schooling as a vehicle for becoming a practitioner, and the inconsistencies between the practices of higher education and adult education.

Janov, J. E. "Creating Meaning: The Heart of Learning Communities." ***Training and Development*** 49, no. 5 (May 1995): 53-58.
Reports on the results of a meeting of the 1994 National League of Cities Annual Leadership Summit in which 150 leaders struggled with the questions of how to create meaning, both individually and communally, and what assumptions are made about who makes meaning within organizations.

Lave, J., and Wenger, E. ***Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation.*** New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
Describes a theory of learning that is social and contextual in nature. Rather than focusing on the situatedness of the meaning or content, the focus is on communities and what it means to learn as a function of being a part of a community.

Lawrence, R. L. "Transcending Boundaries: Building Community through Residential Adult Learning." In ***Proceedings of the 18th Annual Midwest Research-to-Practice Conference in Adult, Continuing, and Community Education***, edited by A. Austin, G. Hynes, and R. T. Miller, pp. 173-179. St. Louis, MO: University of Missouri-St. Louis, 1999. <http://www.umsl.edu/services/itc/midwest/start.pdf>
Discusses the potential for residential adult learning experiences in the formation of cohort learning groups in both distance (computer conferencing) and face-to-face groups in graduate adult education programs.

Liedtka, J. "Linking Competitive Advantage with Communities of Practice." ***Journal of Management Inquiry*** 8, no. 1 (March 1999): 5-16.
Argues that important themes from a number of characteristically separate literature bases in the field of management—organizational behavior, operations management, corporate strategy, and business ethics—converge to provide a view of organizations as communities of practice that are build on an underlying ethic of care.

Marsick, V. J.; Bitterman, J.; and van der Veen, R. ***From the Learning Organization to Learning Communities toward a Learning Society. Information Series no. 382***. Columbus: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Center on Education and Training for Employment, College of Education, The Ohio State University, 2000. (ED 440 294) <http://ericacve.org/majorpubs.asp>
Explores the common assumption that education must be made an open, interconnected chain of learning opportunities available throughout the life span. Examines learning in three distinct but interrelated domains: the domain of work, the domain of the community, and the domain of politics.

Moore, A. B., and Brooks, R.. "Learning Communities and Community Development: Describing the Process." ***Learning Communities: International Journal of Adult and Vocational Learning*** no. 1 (November 2000): 1-15. <http://www.crlra.utas.edu.au/Journal/contents.html>
Describes features of learning communities: they transform themselves, share wisdom and recognition, bring others in, and share results. Discusses actions of learning communities, barriers to their development, and future potential. Examines the connection between learning communities and community development by using a case study example.

Palloff, R. M., and Pratt, K. ***Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace: Effective Strategies for the Online Classroom***. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999.
Shows how to create a virtual classroom environment that fosters a sense of community and helps students achieve their academic goals. Case studies and examples from a variety of successful online courses are used to illustrate and support the suggestions.

Russell, M. "Online Learning Communities: Implications for Adult Learning." ***Adult Learning*** 10, no. 4 (Summer 1999): 28-31.
Describes how one organization, SeniorNet, is meeting the needs of its members by using technology to provide learning opportunities that can be characterized as transformative and self-directed.

Russell, M., and Ginsburg, L. ***Learning Online: Extending the Meaning of Community. A Review of Three Programs from the Southeastern United States***. Philadelphia: National Center on Adult Literacy, University of Pennsylvania, 1999. (ED 437 540)
Describes the characteristics of online learning communities and highlights three organizations that demonstrate these features. The learning delivery systems offer new ways to think about the delivery of instruction, the definition of a learning event, and how adult learning itself might be conceptualized.

Senge, P. M. "Creating Learning Communities." ***Executive Excellence*** 15, no. 3 (March 1997): 17-18.
Five operating principles for creating learning communities are articulated. The underlying assumption of these principles is that they will result in the type of organization within which individuals would like to work.

St. Clair, R. "On the Commonplace: Reclaiming Community in Adult Education." ***Adult Education Quarterly*** 49, no. 1 (Fall 1998): 5-14.
Community is considered in terms of a relationship rather than as an entity. When community is assumed to be a relationship, interesting questions are raised for adult educators, including the role and positionality of adult educators and learning theory and the ways in which the situated nature of adult learning is envisioned.

Stamps, D. "Communities of Practice: Learning Is Social. Training Is Irrelevant?" ***Training*** 34, no. 2 (February 1997): 34-42.
Describes how new ideas about social learning may hold the key to understanding how people really learn at work. Proposes that communities of practice may be a way to move away from artificial forms of training.

Wenger, E. ***Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity***. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
Proposes a social theory of learning that places learning in the context of individuals' lived experiences of participation in the world. The four components of meaning, practice, community, and identity are integrated in the theory.

Wenger, E. C., and Snyder, W. M. "Communities of Practice: The Organizational Frontier." ***Harvard Business Review*** 78, no. 1 (January-February 2000a): 139-145.
Communities of practice are groups of people informally bound by shared expertise and passion for joint enterprise. In organizations that value knowledge, they can help drive strategy, solve problems quickly, transfer best practices, develop professional skills, and help recruit and retain talented employees.

Wenger, E., and Snyder, W. "Learning in Communities." ***LINEZine*** Summer 2000b. <http://www.linezine.com/1/features/ewwslc.htm>
To be successful in the knowledge-based economy, organizations will need to create and grow learning communities. The need for people to share knowledge across business units, the growing recognition that the most valuable knowledge in organizations is "tacit," and the increasing realization that collective intelligence must be brought to bear to solve important problems are the factors driving community-based organizational learning.

Zukas, M., and Malcolm, J. "Pedagogies for Lifelong Learning: Building Bridges or Building Walls?" Supporting Lifelong Learning: Global Internet Colloquium, 2000. <http://www.open.ac.uk/lifelong-learning/papers>
The educator as a situated learner within a community of practice is one of five pedagogic identities discussed in this paper. Learning within a community is contrasted with individualized learning.

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